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Padded résumé inflates a lie

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It's cap-and-gown season. A new crop of accomplished graduates is about to enter the work force, résumés in hand. But do their résumés tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Did the "honor student" really earn top grades? Is the state university "business major" actually the product of an unaccredited diploma mill?

Many employers are on the lookout for padded résumés that exaggerate applicants' accomplishments. Some rely on human-resources professionals to carefully screen job applicants. Psychological, character and substance-abuse tests are common. But employers also verify academic records and check up on credit, references and criminal histories.

ADP Screening and Selection Services, a firm that investigates job applicants for prospective employers, found a whopping 41 percent of the information provided by applicants it reviewed in 2006 did not match information obtained from applicants' former schools, professional groups and employers.

Before computers and the Internet, it was probably easier to get away with dishonest résumés. Checking up on someone could be prohibitively expensive. It could require hours of poring over individual paper records. Now investigators need only invest a few seconds at a keyboard and a click of the mouse. Who knows how many Baby Boomers have built successful careers on a foundation of fake credentials?

When Marilee Jones applied for a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology 28 years ago, she falsely claimed to have earned degrees from Albany Medical College, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Union College. In reality she had attended the obscure College of Saint Rose. Jones ascended the ranks at MIT to become the school's celebrated Dean of Admissions. The lie caught up with her this spring, and she resigned.

Despite advances in information technology that ease data retrieval, not all businesses take the time to check out prospective employees. Contemporary job applicants seem to know this, because the lies continue. As Lisa Lerer, writing for Forbes.com, observes "almost everyone lies on their résumé ... from CEOs to security guards." People today fabricate past jobs, adoring supervisors, community service and college degrees. Job candidates lie about their ages, foreign-language abilities, awards and salaries.

It seems obvious that lying on a résumé is unethical, and yet the practice is so common, you have to wonder.

Some types of résumé deception are flat-out wrong. Just about everyone would agree that a high school dropout should not apply for a job claiming to be a physician with a medical degree. Similarly, a person with a history of DUI traffic offenses and statutory rape convictions should not conceal his past to get a job driving a school bus. In these two cases the misrepresentation violates the virtue of integrity. Moreover, the deception poses an unreasonable danger to the public. To undertake positions of responsibility far beyond the bounds of one's technical and moral competence can lead to public disaster. The risk of danger to the public also explains why certain employers -- such as hospitals and school districts -- have an ethical obligation not to take résumés at face value, but to thoroughly investigate all job applicants.

Other types of résumé deception fall into a moral gray zone. Résumé "puffery" is not as dangerous and dishonest as résumé fraud. Claiming to have managed a pizza parlor when you were only the assistant manager of a pizza parlor is puffery and does not generally carry the risk of catastrophe. Nor does claiming

to have been an A student when you actually got mostly Bs. And for a range of office- work positions, the graduate of an obscure small college may be as qualified as a graduate of a famous university like Rutgers or Princeton. If you can perform the job, why does it matter where you previously studied or worked? Doesn't everyone deserve a great job and a chance to prove themselves? What's the ethical problem with merely embellishing credentials, if that's what it takes to get you in the door?

I believe job applicants submit padded résumés on the basis of a belief that is not false: Some employers won't give truthful applicants a shot at jobs they could actually perform. Some employers are overly impressed by "pretty paper" -- résumés that sparkle and shine with the names of elite schools, prominent people and Fortune 500 companies. Some employers look for buzz words on the résumés that pile up on their desks, words like "manager" and "supervisor."

Yet, in the end, the follies of employers do not justify submitting deceptive résumés.

First, lying on résumés because some employers are shallow, lazy and snobbish does a disservice to government and private-sector employers who are not like that at all. Many employers invest a great deal of money and time into planning and shaping a talented, diverse workforce to match their needs, organizational cultures and social responsibilities. No matter how much job applicants dislike what seem to be arbitrary "paper" qualifications, they are not entitled to try to thwart employers' efforts to staff their firms with people in whom they have confidence. In a few jobs, having once worked for a prominent company or having attended a particular school whose graduates are "players" in a certain industry are bona fide job qualifications because of business networking opportunities they entail. Such is the nature of a market economy.

Second, résumé deception undervalues serious educational institutions and the organizations that credential skilled workers and professionals. Diplomas cannot be categorically dismissed as just pieces of paper. Serious schools and credentialing programs offer something to their graduates that other people without comparable training will generally lack. We all know someone who is smarter than their boss. Yet job applicants who have not actually attended college or actually trained for a job they want may be unable to appreciate just how underqualified they really are. It's hard to know what you don't know.

Finally, and most important, misrepresentation on a résumé takes unfair advantage of equally deserving and more deserving applicants for the same job. Whenever someone applies for a job he or she is competing with others who apply for the same position. No matter how badly you may need a job, fellow applicants in a similar boat merit the respect of fair play. Sadly, nepotism, cronyism, and sex and race discrimination can undermine the fairness of employment decisions. The people who inflate or fake their résumés are cheaters. They take advantage of innocent fellow applicants by introducing perhaps another dispiriting dimension of inequity into a flawed-enough game.

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